

THE IMPACT OF VIRAL MARKETING IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Viral marketing played a major role in tourism marketing for the government and private sector. This marketing strategies often referred to as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Extensive research studies have been carried out on the mechanism and importance of viral marketing. However, there is a research gap on the viral marketing impact on the tourist destination in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the impact of viral marketing or electronic WOM (eWOM) on a tourism destination choice after COVID-19, using the theory of planned behaviour (TPB). The intended outcome and purpose of the study is look at possible adaptive marketing strategies and approaches in the endemic stage of COVID-19. The effectiveness of viral marketing in promoting tourist destinations in Malaysia is studied in this literature view to identify the influence of viral content in tourist decision-making.

Keywords: Viral Marketing, eWOM, Social Media Marketing, Tourism Industry, COVID-19

Introduction

In recent decades, the advancement of technology redefined the rules of marketing all over the world. Digital marketing significantly impacts the success of the business as media and marketing has become a source of development for the tourism industry (Gonzalez et al., 2019). The rise and spread of the use of the Internet have led to the emergence of a new form of digital marketing strategy, which is viral marketing.

Viral marketing has been created to advertise and transmit information through new channels of communication. The internet made communications much easier and required lesser effort to transmit messages to others. Several authors have highlighted the importance of viral marketing (Deepa and Thenmozhi, 2013; Soliman, 2014; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2020) and its impact on consumer behaviour (Huete-Alococer, 2017; Litvin et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2017). A positive relationship is found between viral marketing and tourists' behaviour in decision making.

In the tourism industry, digital transformation has led to the sharing of opinions about personal experiences over the Internet. The central problem to be addressed in this study is the influence of the current environmental factors that influences consumer's decision making. The problem is

identified to be threefold, which includes ineffective communication strategy, understanding of current consumer's destination choice and the usefulness of viral content.

However, previous studies do not include the macroenvironment factor, COVID-19 pandemic as the moderating factor, and thus several research questions will be discussed in this literature review:

- (1) Is viral marketing an effective communication strategy to promote tourist destinations in Malaysia?
- (2) How have COVID-19 affected tourist behaviour towards destination choice?
- (3) Does online viral content influence the tourist decision-making process?

Literature Review

Viral Marketing

Viral marketing is the new concept of transformation from word-of-mouth marketing to the Internet form, which was formerly known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). It is defined as a form of marketing that permits exponential distribution of content in networkbased channels in the shortest time with comparatively little effort and additionally generates measurable added value through the content, which leads to a high cost-benefit effect (Reichstein and Bruschi, 2019). It is also referred to as the "holy grail" of digital marketing (Akpınar and Berger, 2017). Viral marketing works famously on the Internet because it provides instant communication at a comparatively lower cost than traditional marketing such as television, billboard, or radio marketing.

The advancement of the internet is the birthplace of viral marketing or electronic word-of-mouth where digital transformation had expanded the possibility for communication. The implementation of viral marketing is influenced by the internet penetration rate of the country. Lekhanya (2014) and Trivedi (2017) found that viral marketing can only be applied in metro cities with higher penetration and social media rate. This is because certain countries such as South Africa have limited knowledge and technology to perform viral marketing among the society, thus the promotion results are uncertain (Lekhanya, 2014).

A recent data research reported that Malaysia has reached a percentage of 84.2% of the internet penetration rate of the total population and has 28 million social media users where 93.7% uses YouTube, 89.1% on Facebook, and 74.7% on Instagram (DataReportal, 2021). The increase in internet usage can be explained by the technology acceptance model where it has proven technology can influence consumer attitude that motivates the consumer to attention and adopt (Bilal et al., 2020). The effectiveness of viral marketing can be maximised while the country obtains a relatively high penetration rate.

Viral marketing is classified into four categories (Daif and Elsayed, 2019; Mohsen and Zahra, 2013; Tellis et al., 2019; Deepa and Thenmozhi, 2013; Soundararaj et al., 2015).

I. ***Pass-along***: The more common type of viral marketing that is initiated to motivate or encourage the user to share the message with others. Short videos are usually more effective in this viral campaign type which people spontaneously forward.

II. ***Incentivised viral***: A reward is offered when someone refers to another person to the organisation or company. This method is often used to increase or expand the customer base.

III. ***Emotional***: A form of viral marketing which aims to connect to the audience on an emotional level such as happiness, anger, or compassion to make the audience acknowledge, remember and share the content.

IV. ***Buzz marketing***: A marketing based on word of mouth to create a fuss about a product, service, or event via technology on social media platforms. The content must include interesting, amusing, catchy, or remarkable elements to create “buzz” (Mohr, 2017).

Several mechanisms make online content viral including content characteristics, psychological motives, emotional responses, situational factors, and individual traits (Liu et al.,2020). Among these factors, content characteristics are the prerequisite factors where psychological motivation and emotional response affect the willingness to share. Tellis et al.(2019) also mentioned that positive emotions of inspiration induce sharing that could also lead to purchase intention (Lee and Hong, 2016). Good viral marketing can create an incredible positive viral effect and change consumer behaviour towards the brand and organisation (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2015; Daif and Elsayed, 2019). Daif and Elsayed (2019) also criticised that a successful viral marketing strategy should be creative and have the ability to gain public attention that could generate buzz, boost sales revenues, increase market share and build a commendable reputation. Viral marketing can be unpredictable as it relies on the interpretation of marketing messages by consumers where sharing messages are the way to provide information or communicate with the audiences. Thus, viral messages must be well-structured and unique to increase sharing rate of the online content.

Malaysia Tourism Industry

Tourism is one of the largest industries in Malaysia by contributing 15.9% to the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019. The international tourists' arrivals reached 26.10 million in 2019 prior to the incident of the COVID-19 outbreak. Marketing has a key role in Malaysia's tourism planning to promote tourist destinations. Iffah (2018) has conducted an in-depth study of the promotional strategy that has been introduced by Malaysia tourism industry. Malaysia has been successful in constructing a strong and clear image to positively influence tourist visitation intentions. Different types of marketing strategies have been adopted by Tourism Malaysia to advertise domestically and internationally such as TV advertising, radio advertising, online promotion, and print advertising.

At the end of 2019, a significant threat to public health emerged. The COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan City, China on 31 December 2019. The number of cases increased exponentially and more confirmed cases were reported. On 25th January 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Malaysia and by then, the virus spread rapidly in the country (Elengoe, 2020). The sudden outbreak of pandemic has triggered an impact on global tourism products and services. Every country has experienced the fastest, widest, and most difficult infection to prevent and control including Malaysia. This new pandemic had a major impact on Malaysia's economic and social development of the Malaysian lifestyle. The tourism market in Malaysia has been suffered an unprecedented huge impact since the COVID-19 pandemic as this industry is more sensitive to the external environment. It also affected almost all-sub sectors in tourism including theme parks, performing arts, travel agencies, hotel accommodation, cruises, and aviation and many companies are facing bankruptcy due to this pandemic.

In fact, the tourism industry faces multiple challenges when dealing with tourism demand and supply (Matiza, 2020). The tourism demand is limited by the perceived risk in terms of social and psychological perspectives where tourism supply challenges include global economy recession and business liquidation during the lockdown period. Malaysia had initiated travel restrictions and the Malaysian Association of Hotels have reported a loss of 68 million lost on the cancellation of hotel bookings in March 2020 (Teoh, 2020). The most noticeable effect is the decline of inbound international tourists in Malaysia. A 36.8% of decline rate has been recorded compared to the same period in 2019 (Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, 2020). The spread of COVID-19 had led to the impose on international travel is the main cause of the severe decline. In the year of the COVID-19 outbreak, the international arrivals to Malaysia faced a steep drop to 4.33 million in 2020, an 83.4% decrease rate compared to 2019.

Viral Marketing as a Marketing Tool for Tourism Industry

Online consumption is growing rapidly while this pandemic not only increases the number of internet users but also brought a group of elderly people to adopt online behaviour. It is foreseeable online will become a new model of tourism consumption in the future with more direct, more transparent prices and a more optimised experience. In fact, viral marketing is proven to be effective in promoting the tourism industry where there is evidence investigated from several countries (Susanti and Kurniawan, 2020; Castro et al., 2017).

The consumer destination decision-making is being affected by the marketing messages where it is the source of development for the tourism industry to succeed in the tourism promotions, thus increasing demand for the tourist destination (Gonzalez et al., 2019). Therefore, the greater the image of the tourist destination, the more the number of tourists visiting the particular destination. The reason that viral marketing is effective in the tourism industry is that tourists can collect reliable information and actual reviews from previous tourists regarding a resort, hotel, or even the destination where positive reviews can increase the likelihood of booking (Siang et al., 2020).

Empirical research has been conducted to examine the success of viral marketing in promoting heritage destinations in Indonesia that was successfully create public awareness, thus promoting tourist destinations (Susanti and Kurniawan, 2020). The viral content is widely spread among all

the social media platforms with the hashtags #restarebanjaratma and #restarea260brebes which eventually generated more than 1,000 Instagram photos and videos. The popularity of tourist destinations has an impact on increasing tourist visits.

Among prior research, it is notable that negative viral marketing can cause an overwhelming impact on the destination image and this will lead to the spread of unflattering comments related to their experiences (Daif and Elsayed, 2019). The destination image has a significant effect on the intention to visit while a good destination image attracts more tourists interest to visit. Negative reviews may not be deadly in traditional marketing however, they may cause lethality towards the tourism industry in this digital era. The penetration of internet users is increasing rapidly and the perceived health risk is avoiding public travel, and as a result, the tourism industry should innovate the marketing strategies to attract tourists as digital marketing has become a key element of destination marketing in times of crisis. Individuals are increasingly influenced by digital media.

Post COVID-19 Tourism Behaviour

In tourism, tourists' behaviour has been always influenced by the development of technology and online trends. Social media played a crucial role in the travel planning process as it provides access to other travelers' experiences through short films, blogs, or recommendations as an ultimate information source (Jalilvand et al., 2013). A drop-in confirms cases have been inspected in the recent days due to the vaccinations ramp up and the movement controls are better enforced said to the Malaysia health chief Noor Hisham Abdullah (The Straits Times, 2021). Chan (2021) had discussed that domestic tourism has the potential to revive the tourism industry. This is because COVID-19 had an impact on tourist behaviour and attitudes towards travelling overseas. The public is shifting towards travel domestically with the concerns of declarations of health, safety issues, travel restrictions, and quarantine durations that seem to be the key opportunities to rebuild the tourism industry in Malaysia where these risks are reduced when travelling domestically.

Perceived risk acts as the moderating factor that can modify a tourist's evaluation of a destination and the travel intention. Wolff et al. (2019) suggested that perceived risk led to anxiety and other negative affective behaviour that can directly impact travel intention. Prior research also established that environmental factors – natural or human-made – could potentially impact tourists perceived risk (Ghulamrabbany et al., 2013;) and studies on the impact of COVID-19 also found the positive relationship between the environment factor and tourism industry (Nagaj and Zuromskaite, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly caused an impact on the development of the tourism sector as well as consumer behaviour which produced perceived risk behaviour in travelling. Several research studies had proven that perceived risk is detrimental to tourists' travel intentions (Kim et al., 2019 and Novellia et al., 2018). Empirical research had been conducted on the Ebola outbreak in the USA found that tourist engages in avoidance behaviour to mitigate health risk during travelling (Huang et al., 2020). Providing similar environmental issues, it can be assumed that the current COVID-19 pandemic can trigger the global tourism industry and impinge on the tourism early recovery stage.

Discussion and Conclusion

The existing literature review identified that positive viral marketing could influence the tourist intention on destination choice. Also, the macroenvironmental factor is included as the moderating factor where the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected the tourism industry in terms of service delivery, travel pattern, avoidance of overpopulated destinations, and hygiene and safety. The changing environment fostered by the pandemic outbreak has implied huge numbers of changes in many aspects of people's lives. One of the most visible is purchasing behaviour. In the tourism industry, the environmental factor had led to tourists' perceived risk during the decision-making process.

Moreover, the use of the Internet had provided a new form of marketing options to the tourism industry. Viral marketing is a great source of information as it leverages the advantages of the Internet to provide reach accessibility and exposure that offline marketing cannot achieve. Using the theory of planned behaviour as the theory to discuss tourists' attitudes and viral content (Ajzen, 2020). A positive attitude led to a stronger intention to engage in advertising (Sanne and Wiese, 2018), which could eventually result in the conversion of behaviour to comment, like, or share the content that is the initial purpose for viral marketing. Precautions are needed on the generate of negative viral content because reviews or recommendations are significant for the implementation of tourism marketing (Zelenka et al., 2021).

Nowadays, tourists obtain destination information online. Negative content can lead to a negative reputation that could damage the destination image. It could weaken the initiative and discourage tourists from visiting a destination. Hence, avoidance of bad reviews is needed because the tourists choose a travel destination based on the reviews online when planning for a trip. Additionally, viral marketing has become a key element in the process of selecting and booking tourism services even after the COVID-19 pandemic. The more informative content, the higher the tendency to share by the consumers. Online viral content has been seen to have a significant positive effect on tourist attitude and behavioural intentions. However, perceived health risk remains to be the factor influencing the decision-making by tourists. Health risk creates uncertainty in tourists' decision to travel.

To respond to the negative perceived values on the environmental risk, communication messages should be centered around tourists. Destination markets should address this concern and convince the consumers that the destination is indeed safe to visit. The willingness to travel may be affected by the characteristics of the destination, for example, the greater the area of tourist congestion will more likely to reduce the willingness to travel to those destinations. Consistently informing tourists on the safety measures can increase the feelings of safety could eventually diminish the negative attitudes (Guo et al., 2021). Several authors also mentioned the negative effect of perceived risk on the tourism industry (Hashim et al., 2018; Chua et al., 2020; Golets et al., 2021). However, this statement is argued.

In Malaysia., to hasten the recovery of the tourism sector, the fundamental task is to increase market confidence and increase tourism numbers. Malaysia's government has introduced the

recovery planning of the “targeted tourism bubble” on March 10, 2021 (Leong,2021). This “travel bubble” act as the partnership between two or more destination in which tourists are allowed to travel to other Recovery MCO states under this “travel bubble”. Nevertheless, several statistics show that Malaysian’s excitement to travel had exceeded the perceived health risks. A steep increase in hotel occupancy rates is recorded in several Malaysia vacation hotspots including Johor Bahru, Penang, and Malacca after the announcement on the lifting of the interstate travel restrictions (The Star, 2021a; The Star, 2021b; Sin Chew, 2021). This situation shows that some of the Malaysians are not being influenced by the perceived health risk in these pandemic times. But currently, there is no empirical evidence to prove this statement.

The travel bubble-related content had been spreading virally within the social media platforms by having 5.9k and 15.2k posts on Facebook and Instagram respectively. The popularity of digital online platforms had increased the influence of viral marketing on Malaysian consumers. Overall of the study, we can conclude that proper viral marketing could eventually help in promoting the tourism industry after the pandemic as perceived health risk does not directly influence the tourist interest. The positive viral content will lead to an improvement in destination image when tourists read online recommendations or reviews from other tourists, leading to a strong intention to travel to a certain destination.

Limitations and Future Research

This literature review is limited to the tourism and hospitality industry in Malaysia. The perception of tourists might need to be focus on and analyse. In-depth future research and survey should be conducted by allocating the Malaysians perceptions through quantitative research to obtain more accurate information on the awareness of the public towards the online viral content and the travel behaviour after the pandemic. Also, various research has been conducted on the importance and effectiveness of viral marketing. However, there is only a little research on how to manage negative viral content. Altogether, this study presents a foundation of knowledge, and future research should continue to understand the connections of viral marketing behind tourism decision-making with post-pandemic behaviour.

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